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Traces: An introduction to the special issue

Jonathan Wyatt, Sophie Tamas, Liz Bondi

This special issue invited scholars from a range of disciplinary and professional backgrounds to engage with the question – writ broad – of what we do with, and how we understand, that which lingers in the shadows. In this introductory paper we begin with some background to this collection, we offer a few over-arching comments concerning the theoretical, aesthetic and practical work we see it as undertaking, and we end with providing a glimpse of the papers.

First, then, some background, sketched with caution. We are three authors – though ‘three’ is arguable, depending, as some contributors to this issue discuss, upon how the individual is conceptualised – and there are therefore myriad versions of how this special issue emerged. Gaps abound in the narratives we offer, spaces left by the choices – some of them unwitting – that we have made; figures sneaking out as our backs turned, voices falling silent as we approached.

Our health warning duly issued, one version of this story begins with the three of us taking part in panels organised by Sophie and Jonathan at the 2011 and 2012 International Congresses of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI) in Illinois, USA, on the connections between research and therapy. The 2011 papers spawned a special issue (Wyatt and Tamas, 2013) and the following year’s panel, with many of the same presenters, focused upon the process of *writing* those earlier papers. Although our attention appeared to be elsewhere, on research and therapy and writing, absence and presence were themes that authors explored across both the two panel sessions and the published papers: Jane Speedy, “haunted by [her] own silence [...]

not an empty silence you understand, but a deeply inhabited silence” (2013, pp. 27-28); Laurel Richardson’s (2013) overstuffed drawer of writing projects-in-(non)-progress, which she closes, unable to linger there; Carolyn Ellis (2013) arguing for writing’s capacity to incorporate loss; Amia Lieblich (2013), whose writing group experiences writing itself, notwithstanding the healing, as a loss; and more.

Liz, in turn, picked up these threads and organised panels involving the three of us and others, at two conferences in 2013, at ICQI in May and at the 3rd Emotional Geographies conference in Groningen, The Netherlands, in early July, one panel at the former and three at the latter. Each session gathered presenters and their papers under the umbrella title, “Absent Presences and Present Absences”. Many (but not all) of the papers in this current collection were first aired at one or both these 2013 conferences.

There: a back-story. This moment of publication marks a point – though not the end point – in the process of these various, entangled histories. A shape-shifting narrative that slips and slides as we write back and forth between the three of us, between Scotland and Ontario, remembering and adjusting, adding and losing; our own relatings interwoven here, more or less unspoken, shimmering.

We write this introduction in early 2016, later than the journal’s editors would have liked. The papers and their authors (like the editors) have been waiting for weeks, since late northern hemisphere autumn, summoning us from folders on our desks and laptops. As the New Year turned we heeded, each of us re-acquainting ourselves with the papers, opening ourselves to them, at different paces and at different moments, taking opportunities when we could. Sophie sent extensive notes; then Jonathan – at the top of a university building one Tuesday in late January, writing to the howling and pouring of the remnants of Storm Jonas, which we felt in

Scotland a few days after it brought the north-east seaboard of the US to standstill – drafted early paragraphs. Sophie riffed off these; and after walking over and round the damage wrought by two subsequent storms Liz wrote herself into and between these fragments; and so on, back and forth, as we found our way into what we wanted to say about our contributors' generous work.

It has, frankly, been difficult to write this introduction: the collection itself has felt like a haunting, something left behind as time moved too quickly onward, blowing all three of us away from the cohesive intention that brought these papers together. Or, perhaps, blowing the papers around, together, apart, into being, while we stood still. Reckoning with a past that doesn't stay in its place, but skips around, putting the lie to our comforting notions of linear temporal order: this theme surfaces in many of the papers, and in our process, too.

Another backstory, loosely pinned to the question, *why bother?*

We've been orbiting absent presences because they pull at us, each in our own way. For Sophie, it has something to do with the thinness of the stories we tell, even when we're trying very hard to be forthcoming and sincere; with the gap between what stories can give us and the heroic quests we expect them to perform; and with finding a way to live peacefully with gaps, silences, and ghosts of all kinds – unmet needs, unanswered questions, impossible histories.

For Liz, the pull of absent presences has hung around in a variety of ways over many years. Some 15 years ago, in an oft-cited and influential paper, Nigel Thrift and John-David Dewsbury (2000) wrote about the deadness of much geographical scholarship and offered a broadly Deleuzian agenda for enlivening our work. But there's something very troubling about their use of a binary opposition between the dead

and the living, which, despite the creativity it has encouraged and valorised, has also seemed to desire the killing off of something already proclaimed as dead. Speaking from and even embracing places and possibilities of haunting has gradually emerged as a way of doing justice to longstanding preoccupations and losses.

And Jonathan is doing this, now at least, because he can't not, because the absences keep calling at him and won't leave him alone; because he has this constant sense that all is not as it seems, that what's missing, or unheard, or occluded, is what's most telling and most demanding. And, furthermore, that which seems apparent and obvious is, well, not. "Things have started to float." (Stewart, 2007, p. 61).

Perhaps we are doing this because *getting the job done* is what responsible professional adults do, and that is what we are aspiring to be, with some ambivalence, which is why we're doing it late, and slowly. But we may have been prevaricating because our task is inherently paradoxical: how do we introduce a collection that is all about elusive absences, without pushing them into orderly presence?

We are trained to make sense through pattern recognition, and there are patterns and themes that wind their way through the collection. They could even be pressed into a numbered list, like this:

1. Selves, memories, and events as non-discrete, flowing across and between bodies, spaces, and times;
2. The instability or indeterminacy of 'truth' in experiential knowledge claims;

3. Telling secrets or naming absent presences as a deliberate, feasible way of making present what has been lost or withheld and the pain of those hurts and losses;
4. Describing problems that are (at least somewhat) solved by the act of description, based on the hope or belief that telling diffuses the disruptive power of absent presences, and that, over time, our condition is capable of moving from worse to better;
5. Imputing meaning to events by inserting them in causal or compelling narratives;
6. Questioning all of the above, sometimes while doing it.

This list is more-or-less factually true, but it betrays the spirit and purpose of this collection. Absent presences are difficult to think with and through – and difficult to introduce – because they fall into the cognitive gap produced by dualist paradigms, in which things can be *this* or *that* but not two opposite ways at the same time.

Reckoning with absent presences undoes the orderly fictions we live by: time is not divisible into *same* and *different*; opposites are not polar sets of two. This all sounds very complicated and theoretical – and it is – but it's also the common-sense way we navigate 'real life.' We deal with contradictory, impossible things all the time; that's life. But it is not, typically, the way life gets written up.

Something that worries us, that we see in our own work and in this collection, is the tendency to adopt an adversarial relationship with absent presences. Too often they appear as problems to be solved, ghosts to be exorcised, and wounds to be healed. Writing starts with troubles – perhaps depends on them – and moves word by word toward resolution, closure, the redemption offered by making sense and use of loss.

This assumes that the things that haunt us are extraneous and separable; that we can and should shake them like a stone out of a shoe. When an absent presence has fought its way into consciousness, and squeezed through the narrow aperture of our attention, what if we welcomed them like a disruptive guest – a toddler or teenager, prone to big feelings, sometimes exhausting and frustrating, but not bad or shameful, not something to be silenced or sent away? Given that our affective attachments to others coexist with our mortality, we either die very young or live immersed in significant, deeply felt, powerfully present absences. Some, maybe many, of these call upon us, whether to cherish and/or transform them.

There is an endless supply of absent presences, within and around us; if we need to explain them into presence in order to make peace with them, our work will never be done. Habitually, as Western scholars, we seek to produce knowledge by snapping experience into the grid of hierarchal differences – an endless task, because so much of what really matters falls through it, like a sieve, and remains unintelligible. Sensing the unknown, those glimpses of things numinous, luminous, proximate and infinitely distant, as a risk to be managed produces very anxious, busy lives.

The authors of these papers try to resist the impossible but mighty pull to create order out of absence/presence, a resistance mobilised through the papers' form or content or both. Several of the pieces in this collection take up Emily Dickinson's call to 'tell all the Truth but tell it slant', Lindy Barbour's paper explicitly so in her stories of her grandfather's impact upon her family. "Sometimes slant, indirect, and refracted," she writes "is the only way of telling, living, and pursuing relationship that is possible". If this is understood as a necessary compromise in cases where 'knowing better' is not possible, we are left with the desire to 'straighten' our stories, as if slant-wise knowledge is flawed, and would ideally be perfected. Instead, *pace* Barbour, these texts ask what possibilities might emerge if the slanted and elusive were

recognized as places where the normative modes of self and sense-making denaturalize and fray, becoming less smoothly compelling, so they can begin to be unravelled and rewoven into more adequate though still slant – not neat, not straightened – containers of thought.

Much of the work in this collection is animated by mourning or grief – from misrecognitions and losses, accidental events or ongoing conditions that estrange us from ourselves and our people. Loss might be part of fabric of our everyday institutions (Tamas), like a colour hint in bland paint, noticeable if we choose to look. Loss might be ambiguous and excruciating (Parr, Stevenson and Woolnough): a nagging question mark, a pain that sears into the reader through measured words. Loss might be of such a scale that it can only be glimpsed in snatches and allusions, like dreams (Alexander). Loss might make something new possible, might enable new stories to be told, might break a spell (Fewell). Loss might be seemingly distant, carried into the present through faded photographs, the traumas they (do not) speak of still reverberating (Lieberman). These stories, whether told plainly, face on, or told aslant, speak of how we live (or not) with loss and the formative absences and presences that shape it. They wonder what is possible. They wonder what is impossible.

Some of these and other pieces in the collection bring us towards the ineffable, “the performance, creation and perception of something unseen but profoundly felt” (Williams), whether that be through religious practices, through the ‘spiritual’ and “non-material virtual world” (Williams), or through other everyday practices of belief. Like Laurel Richardson, who meditates on two experiences of survival and gives us the word ‘grace’ to consider; or Joyce Davidson and Sophie Tamas, who find the ghost of gender, hovering around the non-neurotypical bodies that it cannot readily possess.

Across this collection there is a recurrent suggestion, maybe a plea, to notice and attend, to listen and attune, to the presence in the absence and the absence in the presence. In the aching search/ings recounted by Hester Parr, Olivia Stevenson and Penny Woolnough, there is an immediacy and urgency to this for those who live on in worlds transformed by inexplicable vanishings around which traces of many kinds accumulate without making sense. In Laurel Richardson's narrative, traces of multiple events weave together, sometimes confusingly, sometimes happily, to remind us that mortality makes life worth living but perhaps only if it comes close enough for us to notice it. Sophie Tamas also asks us to attend to the ghostly presences that not only haunt but also humanise the corridors, lobbies, lifts, washroom and offices of academic departments. Tamas's ghost stories hold out the promise of re-enchanting the too-often disenchanting groves of academe and this theme of re-enchantment also pervades the therapeutic landscape of the Pentecostal Christian community devoted to drug rehabilitation that inspires Andrew Williams' visceral account of forms of what we might call grace. The returns of listening carefully may have surprising consequences as in Joyce Davidson's and Sophie Tamas's appreciation of nebulous strangeness of gender when viewed from the perspective of at least some of those on the autistic spectrum. Alongside these calls to pause and listen for a moment, other contributors speak to the myriad ways in which traces move to and fro across generations, often and perhaps inevitably misrecognised and yet still present as with the feeling of unknown siblings of which Sue Lieberman and Dagmar Alexander speak; the paradoxical calling to speech of a mute child in Judith Fewell's tattered script; and the echoes and premonitions, which reverberate around and beyond late nineteenth century Europe in Lindy Barbour's slant telling of interwoven lives.

Ah, but all such attempts to group and collect and summarise are so unjust, so reductive, so bound to fail. They smooth what are distinctive and unique into a notion of connection and uniformity. They're all speaking the same thing, apparently, as if the three of us have planned it this way, as if we had any control. We hover over the keys, resisting the urge to place the cursor over the first word of the offending paragraphs, smooth our highlighting fingers across the pad, and stab the delete button in frustration. Be gone. You win, absence. At our best, though, we have been circling back to these papers to draw them together, not to mash them into a ball, but, light in our arms, more like the little girl collecting words in a golden net in the piece by Dagmar Alexander. We have been gathering them, one by one, holding their weight in our six separate/together hands, sometimes more than one in a single palm, so that they can be released into the world to do whatever happens next.

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